Simeon Stylites

(c. 390 – 2 September 459)

BRIEFING

Simeon Stylites or Symeon the Stylite (Greek: Συμεών ὁ Στυλίτης; Syriac: ܫܡܥܘܢ ܕܥܡܘܕܐ, romanized: *Šimʕun d'Astʕonā*; Arabic: سمعان العمودي, romanized: *Simʿān al-ʿAmūdī* c. 390 – 2 September 459) was a Syrian Christian ascetic, who achieved notability by living 36 years on a small platform on top of a pillar near Aleppo (in modern Syria). Several other stylites later followed his model (the Greek word *style* means "pillar"). Simeon is venerated as a saint by the Eastern Catholic Churches, Oriental Orthodox Churches, Eastern Orthodox Church, and Roman Catholic Church. He is known formally as Simeon Stylites the Elder to distinguish him from Simeon Stylites the Younger, Simeon Stylites III and Symeon Stylites of Lesbos.

SOURCES

There exist three major early biographies of Simeon. The first of these is by Theodoret, bishop of Cyrrhus, and is found within his work *Religious History*. This biography was written during Simeon's lifetime, and Theodoret relates several events of which he claims to be an eyewitness. The narrator of a second biography names himself as Antonius, a disciple of Simeon's. This work is of unknown date and provenance. The third is a Syriac source, which dates to 473. This is the longest of the three, and the most effusive in its praise of Simeon; it places Simeon on a par with the Old Testament prophets, and portrays him as a founder of the Christian Church. The three sources exhibit signs of independent development; although they each follow the same rough outline, they have hardly any narrative episodes in common.

All three sources have been translated into English by Robert Doran. The Syriac life has also been translated by Frederick Lent.

It is possible that traditional sources for the life of Simeon Stylites misrepresent his relation to Chalcedonian Christianity. Syriac letters in the British Museum attributed to Simeon Stylites indicate that he was a Miaphysite and opposed the result of the Chalcedonian council (Council of Chalcedon AD 451).

LIFE

Simeon was the son of a shepherd. He was born in Sis, now the Turkish town of Kozan in Adana Province. Sis was in the Roman province of Cilicia. After the division of the Roman Empire in AD 395, Cilicia became part of the Eastern Roman Empire. Christianity took hold quickly there.

According to Theodoret, Simeon developed a zeal for Christianity at the age of 13, following a reading of the Beatitudes. He entered a monastery before the age of 16. From the first day, he gave himself up to the practice of an austerity so extreme that his brethren judged him to be unsuited to any form of community life. They asked Simeon to leave the monastery.

Simeon shut himself up in a hut for one and a half years, where he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking. When he emerged from the hut, his achievement was hailed as a miracle. He later took to standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him.

After one and a half years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence on the slopes of what is now the Sheik Barakat Mountain, part of Mount Simeon. He chose to live within a narrow space, less than 20 meters (66 ft) in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the area to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions. This eventually led him to adopt a new way of life.

In order to get away from the ever-increasing number of people who came to him for prayers and advice, leaving him little if any time for his private austerities, Simeon discovered a pillar which had survived among ruins in nearby Telanissa (modern-day Taladah in Syria).

When the monastic Elders living in the desert heard about Simeon, who had chosen a new and strange form of asceticism, they wanted to test him to determine whether his extreme feats were founded in humility or pride. They decided to order Simeon under obedience to come down from the pillar. They decided that if he disobeyed, they would forcibly drag him to the ground, but if he was willing to submit, they were to leave him on his pillar. Simeon displayed complete obedience and humility, and the monks told him to stay where he was.

The first pillar that Simeon occupied was little more than 3 meters (10 ft). He later moved his platform to others, the last in the series reportedly more than 15 meters (50 ft) from the ground. At the top of the pillar was a platform, which is believed to have been about one square meter and surrounded by a baluster.

Edward Gibbon in his *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* describes Simeon's life as follows:

> *In this last and lofty station, the Syrian Anachoret resisted the heat of thirty summers and the cold of as many winters. Habit and exercise instructed him to maintain his dangerous situation without fear or giddiness, and successively to assume the different postures of devotion. He sometimes prayed in an erect attitude, with his outstretched arms in the figure of a cross, but his most familiar practice was that of bending his meagre skeleton from the forehead to the feet; and a curious spectator, after numbering twelve hundred and forty-four repetitions, at length desisted from the endless account. The progress of an ulcer in his thigh might shorten, but it could not disturb this celestial life; and the patient Hermit expired, without descending from his column.*

Even on the highest of his columns, Simeon was not withdrawn from the world. If anything, the new pillar attracted even more people, both pilgrims who had earlier visited him and sightseers as well. Simeon was available each afternoon to talk with visitors. By means of a ladder, visitors were able to ascend within speaking distance. It is known that he wrote letters, the text of some of which have survived to this day, that he instructed disciples, and that he also lectured to those assembled beneath. He especially preached against profanity and usury. In contrast to the extreme austerity that he practiced, his preaching conveyed temperance and compassion and was marked with common sense and freedom from fanaticism.

Much of Simeon's public ministry, like that of other Syrian ascetics, can be seen as socially cohesive in the context of the Roman East. In the face of the withdrawal of wealthy landowners to the large cities, holy men such as Simeon acted as impartial and necessary patrons and arbiters in disputes between peasant farmers and within the smaller towns.

Reports of Simeon reached the church hierarchy and the imperial court. The Emperor Theodosius II and his wife Aelia Eudocia greatly respected Simeon and listened to his counsels, while the Emperor Leo I paid respectful attention to a letter he sent in favour of the Council of Chalcedon. Simeon is also said to have corresponded with Genevieve of Paris.

Patriarch Domninos II (441–448) of Antioch visited the monk and celebrated the Divine Liturgy on the pillar.

Evagrius Scholasticus records an instance in which Simeon denounced the emperor's prefect Asclepiodotus to Emperor Theodosius for supposedly encouraging pagans and Jews and undermining Christians. Theodosius then fired Asclepiodotus.

Once when Simeon was ill, Theodosius sent three bishops to beg him to come down and allow himself to be attended by physicians, but Simeon preferred to leave his cure in the hands of God, and before long he recovered.

A double wall was raised around him to keep the crowd of people from coming too close and disturbing his prayerful concentration. Women were, in general, not permitted beyond the wall, not even his own mother, whom he reportedly told, "If we are worthy, we shall see one another in the life to come." She submitted to this, remaining in the area, and embraced the monastic life of silence and prayer. When she died, Simeon asked that her coffin be brought to him, and he reverently bade farewell to his dead mother.

Accounts differ with regard to how long Simeon lived upon the pillar, with estimates ranging from 35 to 42 years. He died on 2 September 459. A disciple found his body stooped over in prayer. The Patriarch of Antioch, Martyrius, performed the funeral of the monk before a huge crowd. He was buried not far from the pillar.

LEGACY

Simeon inspired many imitators. For the next century, ascetics living on pillars, stylites, were a common sight throughout the Christian Levant.

He is commemorated as a saint in the Coptic Orthodox Church, where his feast is on 29 Pashons. He is commemorated 1 September by the Eastern Orthodox and Eastern Catholic Churches, and 5 January in the Roman Catholic Church.

A contest arose between Antioch and Constantinople for the possession of Simeon's remains. The preference was given to Antioch, and the greater part of his relics were left there as a protection to the unwalled city. Pilgrim tokens for Simeon Stylites have been found across the Byzantine Empire, attesting to the popularity of his veneration.

The ruins of the vast edifice erected in his honour and known in Arabic as the *Qalaat Semaan* ("the Fortress of Simeon") can still be seen. They are located about 30 km northwest of Aleppo and consist of four basilicas built out from an octagonal court towards the four points of the compass to form a large cross. In the centre of the court stands the base of the *style* or column on which Simeon stood.

On 12 May 2016, the pillar within the church reportedly took a hit from a missile, fired from what appeared to be Russian jets backing the Syrian government.

SIMEON STYLITES ACCORDING TO A CATHOLIC ARTICLE

St. Simeon was the first and probably the most famous of the long succession of stylitoe, or "pillar-hermits", who during more than six centuries acquired by their strange form of asceticism a great reputation for holiness throughout eastern Christendom.

If it were not that our information, in the case of the first St. Simeon and some of his imitators, is based upon very reliable first-hand evidence, we should be disposed to relegate much of what history records to the domain of fable; but no modern critic now ventures to dispute the reality of the feats of endurance attributed to these ascetics.

Simeon the Elder, was born about 388 at Sisan, near the northern border of Syria. After beginning life as a shepherd boy, he entered a monastery before the age of sixteen, and from the first gave himself up to the practice of an austerity so extreme and to all appearance so extravagant, that his brethren judged him, perhaps not unwisely, to be unsuited to any form of community life. Being forced to quit them he shut himself up for three years in a hut at Tell-Neschin, where for the first time he passed the whole of Lent without eating or drinking.

This afterwards became his regular practice, and he combined it with the mortification of standing continually upright so long as his limbs would sustain him. In his later days he was able to stand thus on his column without support for the whole period of the fast. After three years in his hut, Simeon sought a rocky eminence in the desert and compelled himself to remain a prisoner within a narrow space less than twenty yards in diameter. But crowds of pilgrims invaded the desert to seek him out, asking his counsel or his prayers, and leaving him insufficient time for his own devotions.

This at last determined him to adopt a new way of life. Simeon had a pillar erected with a small platform at the top, and upon this he determined to take up his abode until death released him. At first the pillar was little more than nine feet high, but it was subsequently replaced by others, the last in the series being apparently over fifty feet from the ground. However extravagant this way of life may seem, it undoubtedly produced a deep impression on contemporaries, and the fame of the ascetic spread through Europe, Rome in particular being remarkable for the large number of pictures of the saint which were there to be seen, a fact which a modern writer, Holl, represents as a factor of great importance in the development of image worship (see the Philotesia in honour of P. Kleinert, p. 42-48).

Even on the highest of his columns Simeon was not withdrawn from intercourse with his fellow men. By means of a ladder which could always be erected against the side, visitors were able to ascend; and we know that he wrote letters, the text of some of which we still possess, that he instructed disciples, and that he also delivered addresses to those assembled beneath. Around the tiny platform which surmounted the capital of the pillar there was probably something in the nature of a balustrade, but the whole was exposed to the open air, and Simeon seems never to have permitted himself any sort of cabin or shelter.

During his earlier years upon the column there was on the summit a stake to which he bound himself in order to maintain the upright position throughout Lent, but this was an alleviation with which he afterwards dispensed. Great personages, such as the Emperor Theodosius and the Empress Eudocia manifested the utmost reverence for the saint and listened to his counsels, while the Emperor Leo paid respectful attention to a letter Simeon wrote to him in favour of the Council of Chalcedon. Once when he was ill Theodosius sent three bishops to beg him to descend and allow himself to be attended by physicians, but the sick man preferred to leave his cure in the hands of God, and before long he recovered. After spending thirty-six years on his pillar, Simeon died on Friday, 2 Sept., 459 (Lietzmann, p. 235).

A contest arose between Antioch and Constantinople for the possession of his remains. The preference was given to Antioch, and the greater part of his relics were left there as a protection to the unwalled city. The ruins of the vast edifice erected in his honour and known as Qal 'at Sim 'ân (the mansion of Simeon) remain to the present day. It consists of four basilicas built out from an octagonal court towards the four points of the compass. In the centre of the court stands the base of St. Simeon's column. This edifice, says H.C. Butler, "unquestionably influenced contemporary and later church building to a marked degree" (Architecture and other Arts, p. 184). It seems to have been a supreme effort of a provincial school of architecture which had borrowed little from Constantinople.